
A
POETICAL ESSAY
ON
D E A T H.



A

P O E T I C A L E S S A Y

O N

D E A T H.

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B I S H O P O F L O N D O N.

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FRIEND to the wretch, whom every friend forsakes,
I woo thee, Death ! In fancy's fairy paths
Let the gay songster rove, and gently trill
The strain of empty joy.—Life and its joys
I leave to those that prize them.—At this hour,
This solemn hour, when Silence rules the world,
And wearied Nature makes a gen'ral pause,
Wrapt in Night's fable robe, thro' cloysters drear
And charnels pale, tenanted by a throng
Of meagre phantoms shooting cros's my path

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With silent glance, I seek the shadowy vale
Of Death.—Deep in a murky cave's recess,
Lav'd by oblivion's lifeless stream, and fenc'd
By shelving rocks and intermingled horrors
Of yew and cypress shade, from all intrusion
Of busy noontide beam, the monarch sits
In unsubstantial majesty enthron'd.
At his right hand, nearest himself in place
And frightfulness of form, his parent Sin,
With fatal industry and cruel care,
Busies herself in pointing all his stings,
And tipping every shaft with venom drawn
From her infernal store : around him rang'd,
In terrible array and strange diversity
Of uncouth shapes, stand his dread ministers :
Foremost old Age, his natural ally
And firmest friend : next him diseases thick,
A motly train ; Fever with cheek of fire ;
Consumption wan ; Palsy half warm with life,
And half a clay-cold lump ; joint-tort'ring Gout,

And ever-gnawing Rheum ; convulsion wild ;
Swol'n Dropsy ; panting Asthma ; Apoplex
Full gorg'd.—There too the Pestilence that walks
In darkness, and the Sickness that destroys
At broad noon day.—These, and a thousand more,
Horrid to tell, attentive wait ; and, when
By Heaven's command Death waves his ebon wand,
Sudden rush forth to execute his purpose,
And scatter desolation o'er the earth.
Ill fated Man, for whom such various forms
Of mis'ry wait, and mark their future prey !
Ah ! why, All-righteous Father, didst thou make
This creature Man ? why wake th' unconscious dust
To life and wretchedness ? O better far
Still had he slept in uncreated night,
If this the lot of being ! Was it for this
Thy breath divine kindled within his breast
The vital flame ? For this, was thy fair image
Stamp'd on his soul in godlike lineaments ?
For this, dominion giv'n him absolute

O'er all thy works, only that he might reign
 Supreme in woe? —From the blest source of good
 Could pain and death proceed? Could such foul ills
 Fall from fair Mercy's hands?—Far be the thought,
 The impious thought! God never made a creature
 But what was good.—He made a living soul:
 THE WRETCHED MORTAL was the work of Man.
 Forth from his Maker's hands he sprung to life,
 Fresh with immortal bloom; no pain he knew,
 No fear of death, no check to his desires,
 Save one command. That one command (which stood
 'Twixt him and death, the test of his obedience)
 Urg'd on by wanton curiosity,
 He broke.—There in one moment was undone
 The fairest of God's works.

————— The same rash hand,
 That pluck'd in evil hour the fatal fruit,
 Unbarr'd the gates of Hell, and let loose Sin
 And Death, and all the family of Pain,
 To prey upon mankind.—Young Nature saw

The monstrous crew, and shook thro' all her frame.
Then fled her new born lustre, then began
Heav'n's cheerful face to low'r, then vapours choak'd
The troubled air, and form'd a veil of clouds
To hide the willing sun.—The earth, convuls'd
With painful throws, threw forth a bristly crop
Of thorns and briars; and insect, bird, and beast,
That wont before with admiration fond
To gaze at man, and fearless croud around him,
Now fled before his face, shunning in haste
Th' infection of his misery.—He alone,
Who justly might, th' offended Lord of man,
Turn'd not away his face, he, full of pity,
Forsook not, in this uttermost distress,
His best lov'd work.—That comfort still remain'd,
(That best, that greatest comfort in affliction)
The countenance of God, and through the gloom
Shot forth some kindly gleams, to cheer and warm
Th' offender's sinking soul.—Hope, sent from Heav'n,
Uprais'd his drooping head, and shew'd afar

A happier sense of things ;

————— the promis'd seed
'Trampling upon the serpent's humbled crest,
Death of his sling disarm'd, and the dank grave
Made pervious to the realms of endless day,
No more the limit, but the gate of life.

Cheer'd with the view, Man went to till the ground
From whence he rose ; sentenc'd indeed to toil
As to a punishment, yet (ev'n in wrath
So merciful is Heav'n) this toil became
The solace of his woes, the sweet employ
Of many a live-long hour, and surest guard
Against Disease and Death.—Death, tho' denounc'd,
Was yet a distant ill, by feeble arm
Of age, his sole support, led slowly on.
Not then, as since, the short-liv'd sons of men
Flock'd to his realms in countless multitudes ;
Scarce in the course of twice five hundred years
One solitary ghost went shiv'ring down
To his unpeopled shore ;—in sober state,

Through the sequester'd vale of rural life,
The venerable patriarch guileless held
The tenor of his way ; labour prepar'd
His simple fare, and temp'rance rul'd his board.
Tir'd with his daily toil, at early eve
He sunk to sudden rest ; gentle and pure
As breath of evening zephyr, and as sweet
Were all his slumbers.

————— With the sun he rose,
Alert and vigorous as he, to run
His destin'd course.—Thus nerv'd with giant strength
He stem'd the tide of time, and stood the shock
Of ages rolling harmless o'er his head.
At life's meridian point arriv'd, he stood,
And looking round saw all the vallies fill'd
With nations from his loins ; full well content
To leave his race thus scatter'd o'er the earth,
Along the gentle slope of life's decline
He bent his gradual way, till full of years
He dropt like mellow fruit into his grave.

Such, in the infancy of time, was man,
So calm was life, so impotent was Death.
O had we but preserv'd these few remains,
These shatter'd fragments of lost happiness,
Snatch'd by the hand of Heav'n from the sad wreck
Of innocence primæval; still had he liv'd
Great ev'n in ruin, tho' fall'n, yet not forlorn,
Though mortal, yet not every where beset
With death in every shape! But he, impatient
To be completely wretched, hastes to fill up
The measure of his woes.—'Twas man himself
Brought Death into the world, and man himself
Gave keenness to his darts, quicken'd his pace,
And multiply'd destruction on mankind.

First Envy, eldest-born of Hell, embrued
Her hands in blood, and taught the sons of men
To make a death which Nature never made,
And God abhorr'd,

————— with violence rude to break
The thread of life ere half its length was run,

And rob a wretched brother of his being.
With joy Ambition saw, and soon improv'd
The execrable deed.—'Twas not enough
By subtle fraud to snatch a single life,
Puny impiety ! whole kingdoms fell
To fate the lust of power ; more horrid still,
The foulest stain and scandal of our nature
Became its boast.—One murder made a villain,
Millions a hero.—Princes were privileg'd
To kill, and numbers sanctified the crime.
Ah ! why will kings forget that they are men ?
And men that they are brethren ? Why delight
In human sacrifice ? Why burst the ties
Of nature, that should knit their souls together
In one soft bond of amity and love ?
Yet still they breathe destruction, still go on
Inhumanly ingenious to find out
New pains for life, new terrors for the grave,
Artificers of Death ! Still monarchs dream
Of universal empire growing up

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✓ From universal ruin.—Blast the design,
Great God of Hosts; nor let thy creatures fall
Unpitied victims at ambition's shrine!

Yet say, should tyrants learn at last to feel,
And the loud din of battle cease to bray:
Should dove-ey'd Peace o'er all the earth extend
Her olive branch, and give the world repose,
Would Death be foil'd? Would health, and strength,
Defy his power? Has he no arts in store, [and youth
No other shafts save those of war?—Alas!
Ev'n in the smile of peace,

————— that smile which sheds
A heav'nly sunshine o'er the soul, there basks
That serpent Luxury: War its thousands slays,
Peace its ten thousands: In th' embattl'd plain,
Tho' Death exults, and claps his raven wings,
Yet reigns he not ev'n there so absolute,
So merciless, as in yon frantic scenes
Of midnight revel and tumultuous mirth,
Where, in th' intoxicating draught conceal'd,

Or couch'd beneath the glance of lawless love,
He snares the simple youth, who, nought suspecting,
Means to be blest;—but finds himself undone.

Down the smooth streams of life the stripling darts
Gay as the morn; bright glows the vernal sky,
Hope swells his sail, and passion steers his course;
Safe glides his little bark along the shore,
Where Virtue takes her stand; but if too far
He launches forth beyond discretions mark,
Sudden the tempest scowls, the furies roar,
Blot his fair day, and plunge him in the deep.
O sad but sure mischance! O happier far
To lie like gallant Howe midst Indian wilds,
A breathless corse, cut off by savage hands
In earliest prime, a generous sacrifice
To freedom's holy cause; than so to fall,
Torn immature from life's meridian joys,
A prey to vice, intemp'rance, and disease.
Yet die ev'n thus, thus rather perish still,
Ye sons of pleasure, by th' Almighty strick'n

Than ever dare (though oft, alas! ye dare)
To lift against yourselves the murd'rous steel,
To wrest from God's own hand the sword of justice,
And be your own avengers.

————— Hold, rash man!
Though without anticipating speed thou'lt rang'd
Through every region of delight, nor left
One joy to gild the evening of thy days,
Though life seem one uncomfortable void,
Guilt at thy heels, before thy face despair,
Yet gay this scene, and light this load of woe,
Compar'd with thy hereafter.—Think, O think,
And ere thou plunge into the vast abyss,
Pause on the verge awhile, look down, and see
Thy future mansion.—Why that start of horror?
From thy slack hand why drops the uplifted steel?
Didst thou not think such vengeance must await
The wretch that, with his crimes all fresh about him,
Rushes irreverent, unprepar'd, uncall'd,
Into his Maker's presence, throwing back

With insolent disdain his choicest gift?
Live then, while Heav'n in pity lends thee life,
And think it all too short to wash away,
By penitential tears and deep contrition,
The scarlet of thy crimes.—So shalt thou find
Rest to thy soul, so unappall'd shalt meet
Death when he comes, not wantonly invite
His ling'ring stroke.—Be it thy sole concern
With innocence to live, with patience wait
Th' appointed hour; too soon that hour will come,
Tho' Nature run her course; but Nature's God,
If need require, by thousand various ways,
Without thy aid, can shorten that short span,
And quench the lamp of life.—O, when he comes,
Rous'd by the cry of wickedness extreme,
To Heav'n ascending from some guilty land,
Now ripe for vengeance; when he comes array'd
In all the terrors of Almighty wrath;
Forth from his bosom plucks his ling'ring arm,
And on the miscreant pours destruction down!

Who can abide his coming? Who can bear
His whole displeasure? In no common form
Death then appears, but starting into size
Enormous, measures with gigantic stride
Th' astonish'd earth, and from his looks throws round
Unutterable horror and dismay.

All nature lends her aid.—Each element
Arms in his cause.—Ope fly the doors of heav'n,
The fountains of the deep their barriers break,
Above, below, the rival torrents pour,
And drown creation—or in the floods of fire
Descends a livid cataract, and consumes
An impious race.—Sometimes, when all seems peace,
Wakes the grim whirlwind, and with rude embrace
Sweeps nations to their grave; or in the deep
Whelms the proud wooden world; full many a youth
Floats on his wat'ry bier, or lies unwept
On some sad desert shore!—At dead of night,
In fullen silence, stalks forth Pestilence:
Contagion close behind taints all her steps

With pois'nous dew ; no smiting hand is seen,
No sound is heard ; but soon her secret path
Is mark'd with desolation ; heaps on heaps
Promiscuous drop :—No friend, no refuge near ;
All, all, is false and treacherous around,
All that they touch, or taste, or breathe, is death.

But ah ! what means that ruinous roar ? why fail
These tott'ring feet ?—Earth to its centre feels
The Godhead's power, and trembling at his touch
Through all its pillars, and in ev'ry pore,
Hurls to the ground with one convulsive heave
Precipitating domes, and towns, and tow'rs,
The work of ages.—Crush'd beneath the weight
Of gen'ral devastation, millions find
One common grave ; not ev'n a widow left
To wail her sons : the house, that should protect,
Entombs its master ; and the faithless plain,
If there he flies for help, with sudden yawn
Starts from beneath him. Shield me, gracious Heav'n,
O snatch me from destruction ! If this globe,

This solid globe, which thy own hand hath made
So firm and sure, if this my steps betray ;
If my own mother earth, from whence I sprung,
Rise up with rage unnatural, to devour
Her wretched offspring, whither shall I fly ?
Where look for succour ? Where, but up to thee,
Almighty Father ! Save, O save thy suppliant
From horrors such as these ! At thy good time
Let death approach ; I reckon not—let him but come
In genuine form, not with thy vengeance arm'd,
Too much for man to bear.—O rather lend
Thy kindly aid to mitigate his stroke,
And at that hour, when all aghast I stand,
(A trembling candidate for thy compassion,)
On this world's brink, and look into the next ;
When my soul, starting from the dark unknown,
Casts back a wishful look, and fondly clings
To her frail prop, unwilling to be wrench'd
From this fair scene, from all her custom'd joys,
And all the lovely relatives of life,

Then shed thy comforts o'er me ; then put on
The gentlest of thy looks.—Let no dark crimes
In all their hideous forms then starting up
Plant themselves round my couch in grim array,
And stab my bleeding heart with two-edg'd torture,
Sense of past guilt, and dread of future woe.
Far be the ghastly crew ! And in their stead,
Let cheerful Memory, from her purest cells,
Lead forth a goodly train of virtues fair,
Cherish'd in earliest youth, now paying back
With tenfold usury the pious care,
And pouring o'er my wounds the heav'nly balm
Of conscious innocence.—But chiefly Thou,
Whom soft-ey'd Pity once led down from heav'n,
To bleed for man, to teach him how to live,
And, oh ! still harder lesson ! how to die,
Disdain not Thou to smoothe the restless bed
Of sickness and of pain.—Forgive the tear
That feeble Nature drops, calm all her fears,
Wake all her hopes, and animate her faith,

Till my rapt soul, anticipating heav'n,
Bursts from the thralldom of incumb'ring clay,
And on the wing of extasy upborne,
Springs in liberty, and light, and life.



T H E E N D.

